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ABSTRACT

This report describes the Chance To Succeed program, a peer tutoring program in which elementary students are paired with sixth or seventh graders who have been carefully selected and trained to be tutors. The program, implemented at an elementary school in California, is supported by Plan for Social Excellence, Inc., a not-for-profit organization that uses private funds to support innovative pilot education projects. Each year, teachers select 10 fourth- and fifth-graders whose math and reading test scores are almost at grade level and pair them with trained sixth- or seventh-graders. The tutors guide younger students through their homework and help them with reading during 1-hour sessions after school 4 days a week. The tutors, selected on the basis of high grades and friendliness and responsible behavior in class, are paid $25 per month for their efforts. The 2-week training program for tutors includes observations of their tutee in class, interviews with the tutee's teachers, discussions of strategies for working with younger students, and role-playing how they will interact with tutees. Benefits have been identified for both the younger and older students. For younger students, teachers see changes in their study habits and motivation. Older students have an opportunity to sharpen their academic and social skills and build their confidence and self-esteem. Improvements in the students' achievement on state-mandated math and English tests over the preceding 2 years have also been partially attributed to this tutoring program. (KB)

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Success

...One child at a time

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Plan For Social Excellence

Case Study

Chance to Succeed Program

Costaño Elementary School

East Palo Alto, California

Plan for Social Excellence, Inc.

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ABOUT PLAN FOR SOCIAL EXCELLENCE

Plan for Social Excellence, Inc. is a not-for-profit organization that utilizes private funds to create or support innovative pilot projects in education in the United States.

The Plan supports programs that are fluid and responsive to the needs of individual schools and communities rather than programs that attempt to address these needs through a system-wide process of reform. This approach allows the Plan and its program participants to circumvent overburdened school bureaucracies to attack the roots of problems that prevent students from succeeding or excelling in their studies.

This "grassroots" approach to educational enrichment and reform is part of a growing trend among educators, community leaders and parents, many of whom have been frustrated by a lack of opportunities for initiatives at the local level. This local emphasis ensures that the reform measures are appropriate to the populations and circumstances in which they are developed, and that these programs benefit the school, the district and the community in significant and lasting ways.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jennifer Deitz Berry is an education reporter for a weekly newspaper covering Palo Alto and East Palo Alto. She holds a master's degree in Education Policy and Evaluation from Stanford University and has worked on evaluation teams for federally funded education research projects.

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A Chance To Succeed

When class lets out at Costaño Elementary School most students hop on buses or wander across the playground headed home. But not Karina Solorzano. The fifth-grader now spends her first hour after school in Room 11 getting help on her homework – not from a teacher or a volunteer – but from sixth-grader Tana Dania.

Both students are part of a unique peer-tutoring program called Chance to Succeed. The daily after-school program is part of Costaño's effort to raise achievement for students at risk of falling behind in English and math.

Each year, teachers choose ten fourth- and fifth-grade students whose math and reading test scores are almost at grade level, and pair them with sixth- or seventh-grade students who have been carefully selected and trained to be tutors. Tutors guide the younger students through their homework and help them with reading.

Costaño Principal Marthelia Hargrove said students' involvement in Chance to Succeed is improving their performance at school. "The tutors really enjoy working with the young students and we can see that our kids are progressing much faster in their academics, and plus they have an opportunity to improve their social skills."

PEER TUTORING IS THE KEY

Karina is a shy young girl with wide eyes and long dark hair. On a recent Tuesday afternoon she and her tutor, Tana, bent their heads together as they scanned pages of a short story about the spaceship Voyager, looking for answers to questions on a worksheet due in class the next day.

The opportunity to work with a tutor has been important to Karina since she can't always get help at home. Karina says her older brother and sister are usually too busy with their own homework, and her parents, who were born in Mexico, both work long hours. Karina's mother has a night job cleaning offices at Sun Microsystems, a large technology company, and by the time Karina gets home from school her mother is usually asleep or on her way to work.

Teachers at Costaño say Karina's situation is typical of many students at the school. Although parents would like to help their children with homework, many have had little education themselves or struggle with language barriers. Others are at work when school lets out and can't be there to make sure their children start their homework rather than watching TV or playing with friends.

"It's helpful because sometimes you're at home and people say, 'Can you go outside and play with me?'" said fourth-grader Diego Marin, who is also in the tutoring program. "Here, you can sit down and not be bothered by anyone."

Diego's teacher, Van Ellis, recommended him for Chance to Succeed because he seemed to have a hard time concentrating and finishing assignments. Within weeks, Ms. Ellis could already see a change in his study habits. "I see him putting in a little more effort in trying to complete the homework and not just doing enough to get by," she said.

Other students in her class also showed signs of improvement. "I've noticed that they're reading a little better, and also they've been turning in assignments and actually putting forth an effort to make sure they're correct," she said.

YOUNGER AND OLDER STUDENTS BENEFIT

Younger students aren't the only ones who benefit from the pairings. Teachers at Costaño believe the tutoring program is also helping older students sharpen their academic and social skills, and build their confidence and self-esteem.

This seems to be true in Tana Dania's case. Tana said he signed up to be a tutor because he likes helping people. "It makes the person helping feel good," he said. "You refresh your mind and their mind by helping them."

Tana said the toughest part of being a tutor is getting nervous, "when deep down inside, you don't really know the answer." But he also faced a challenge trying to break the ice with Karina. During their first few sessions, she was too shy to ask for help. When Tana asked to see her work, Karina would cover up her paper and pull it away.

Tana said he eventually learned to put less pressure on Karina and to give her more say in how they spent the time. His approach seemed to work. Tana says she's more cooperative now. Karina says he's funny. Both say they've become friends.

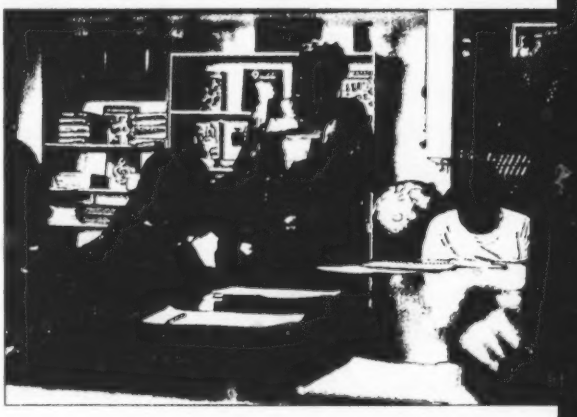
TUTORING HELPS RAISE ACHIEVEMENT

Of all the schools in Ravenswood, Costaño Elementary has shown the greatest improvement in scores on state-mandated math and English achievement tests over the last two years. California's accountability system ranks schools based on test score performance, and Costaño continues to earn a perfect "10" when compared against schools sharing similar demographics.

Dr. Hargrove believes expanding the tutoring programs offered at Costaño is part of what's helped improve achievement. "Many students don't have a quiet place to study and receive the help that they need to complete their homework accurately," she said.

Dr. Hargrove said the peer-tutoring approach Chance to Succeed uses is particularly effective, because regardless of whether students participate as tutors or tutees, they become more confident in their ability to do well in school and more motivated to learn.

"Sometimes students learn best from other students," she said. "They're closer in age, the language they use is more simple, and it's easier for them to understand each other."



CHANCE TO SUCCEED GETS ITS START AT COSTAÑO

Costaño first introduced Chance to Succeed in fall of 1998 after teachers won a grant from the program's sponsoring nonprofit organization, Plan for Social Excellence. Fifth-grade teacher Oretha Morrison has supervised the tutoring program since the beginning. She works with

other teachers to select tutors and tutees they believe will benefit most, and oversees the program throughout the year.

"You really have to make sure you have a teacher who's committed to the philosophy and will spend time training the tutors," said Dr. Hargrove. "It really takes dedication and commitment to the students."

The school chose not to target the lowest achieving students for the program. Instead, they picked those who were just below grade-level. "We wanted to get those kids who are almost there," Ms. Morrison said. "We didn't have a program for those kids that are kind of in the middle and just barely missing the point."

At the start of each year, fourth- and fifth-grade teachers conduct a skills assessment of their students, reviewing grades and monitoring how well students are doing in reading and comprehension. "When we read aloud I can tell the kids that really struggle with reading, and those are the ones I pull out," said fourth-grade teacher Ms. Ellis.

In selecting tutors, Ms. Morrison looks for students who have high grades and appear to be friendly and responsible in class. She will often invite back tutors who showed a strong commitment the year before, or she'll promote tutees who've been successful in the program. Tutors receive $25 per month for their efforts. Ms. Morrison usually pays them with gift cards from Target. To be part of the program, tutors must also agree to attend a two-week training session where Ms. Morrison impresses upon them the importance of their role. "I try to explain to them, 'This is your partner in learning. You're responsible for helping with this person's education.'"

Training typically begins in mid-October with exercises drawn from a detailed instruction guide provided by the Plan for Social Excellence. "I really go by that guide," Ms. Morrison said. "It's great training."

While in training, students will observe how their tutee behaves in class and interview teachers to find out more about the tutees. They report back their observations to Ms. Morrison and the other tutors, and together, they discuss strategies for working with the younger students. During discussions, some tutors mention that their tutees were shy in class, afraid to raise their hands for help. Ms. Morrison asks them to think about ways they can help draw students out and make them feel more confident participating.

Tutors also role-play how they will interact with tutees, imagining how they would respond to a tutee who might be cheerful one day, and then grumpy or uncooperative the next. To prepare tutors for an uncomfortable situation, sixth-grader Rosa Solorzano pretends to be a tutee in a bad mood, while Teresa Villalobos acts out the part of the tutor. Teresa greets Rosa and asks how her day at school has been.

"Does it matter?" Rosa snaps back.

"Yes," Teresa says.

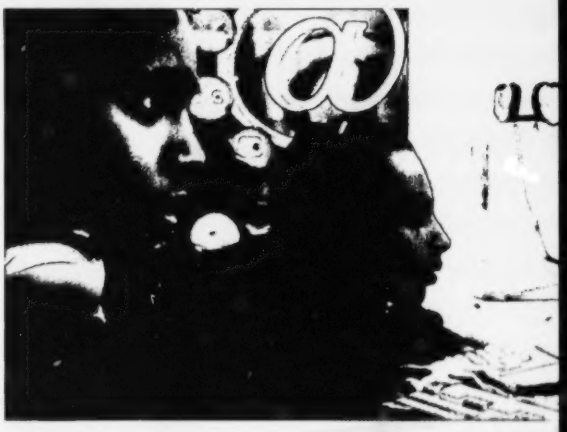
"I don't think it does," Rosa says.

Rosa then tries to convince her tutor she doesn't have any homework, but after Teresa asks a few more questions, Rosa admits she didn't finish her math because she doesn't know how to add.

When the role-playing is over, Ms. Morrison asks her tutors to talk about what has happened. One student notices that even though the situation started out badly, the tutee seemed much happier once she started working with the tutor and was able to learn something.

Ms. Morrison points out the good strategies the tutor used, reminding them not to take it personally if a tutee is sometimes rude. "First try to find out, what is the problem?" she counsels the tutors. "Why is my tutee in such a bad mood?"

She reminds them that even if tutees seem frustrated or confused at times, it will be worth it for those moments when the tutees finally understand the lesson. "When you see that tutee's expression light up, you're going to feel really good. That's how I feel as a teacher."



STICKING TO A STRUCTURED PROGRAM

Tutors meet with their tutees four days each week, beginning in November and continuing through the rest of the school year. Most days follow a similar routine. When students arrive, tutors ask them about their homework and if there are areas where they need the most help. During much of the hour-long session, tutors will guide their tutees through assignments, answering questions and checking answers to make sure students are on the right track.

Having a chance to work one-on-one with a tutor is great for students who don't quite understand a lesson the first time it's taught,

said Ms. Ellis. "I think they feel more comfortable working with their own peers; they're not as intimidated as they are with a teacher. I think that helps. And then the kids are a little more patient."

Ms. Morrison also reserves at least 15 minutes of each session for tutees to read to their tutors from books in the "Accelerated Reader" program, which includes titles such as Where the Red Fern Grows and Tom Sawyer.

Once a week, the group will go to the school's computer lab where they have access to a variety of educational software. Tutees take comprehension tests to make sure they've been paying close attention as they read with their tutors. Other software programs help teach grammar, spelling, vocabulary and math.

Students keep folders with daily logs of their activities. A checklist asks them to record what homework they worked on each afternoon, what books the tutee read, and whether they arrived on time. Tutors also maintain journals and skill evaluations of their tutees, recording how well their interactions went and keeping track of areas where their tutees are improving or are still in need of help.

As a reward at the end of each day, Ms. Morrison brings in treats she buys in bulk - fruit snacks, Doritos, or their favorite: king-size Snickers bars.

MORE STUDENTS HOPE TO JOIN

Perhaps the biggest challenge Ms. Morrison faces now is trying to accommodate all of the students who would like to become part of Chance to Succeed. She is convinced the program's success depends on keeping numbers small so she can closely monitor students' progress. As a result, she's had to turn down students who've already tutored for two years, but want to stay on for a third, explaining that other students also deserve a chance. Ms. Morrison also maintains a waiting list of students who are hoping to work with a tutor if space opens up. "One little boy comes to me every day and says, 'No one has dropped out yet?'"

Ms. Ellis said fourth-graders in her class haven't exactly hidden the fact that they're pleased about having been chosen for the program. "I'm telling you, they're excited about it. They always come to me talking about the tutors and how nice they are, and this is what we did," she said. "They feel special that someone is interested and taking the time out to help them."

CHANCE TO SUCCEED COMES TO EAST PALO ALTO

Costaño Elementary School is part of the Ravenswood City School District, which serves students in kindergarten through eighth grade who live in East Palo Alto and eastern Menlo Park. Long-time residents and newcomers share an optimism that their neighborhoods are "up and coming," but challenges still remain.

Many families in these neighborhoods are poor. Roughly 60 percent of students are eligible for Federal aid, in the form of free or reduced-priced lunches, because of their families' low incomes. About half of the children in Ravenswood live with only one parent or with a guardian who is not their mother or father.

The city's population was at one time almost entirely African American. Now over half its residents are Mexican, and the Pacific Islander population is also growing. Many adults are not yet U.S. citizens and about 70 percent of the district's students are still learning to speak English.

Costaño Elementary School

East Palo Alto is working to turn around its negative image after being named the nation's "murder capital" in 1992 - the city with the greatest number of homicides per capita. Conditions have markedly improved since then. Home prices have risen and the area has begun to attract large commercial chains like Home Depot and the Sheraton Hotel. Even so, the city still has no grocery store and little local industry to provide jobs or tax revenue.

What makes these neighborhoods even more unique are their proximity to prosperous Silicon Valley. A freeway is the only clear divide between East Palo Alto and Palo Alto, yet the differences between the two sides are striking. With its manicured lawns, spacious homes and tree-lined streets, Palo Alto has an almost suburban feel. The city grew up around Stanford University, and residents are reported to have more advanced degrees per capita than in any other U.S. city. It is where computer giant Hewlett-Packard got its start and where Apple CEO Steve Jobs makes his home. The median home price is nearly $1 million.

Much has been made of the "digital" and economic divide separating the two cities, but local companies and foundations have been active in their efforts to help close those gaps. Programs have been set up offering job training and computer classes to help prepare residents in East Palo Alto and eastern Menlo Park for work in the high-tech sector. Companies like Hewlett Packard, Cisco and Sun Microsystems have donated computer equipment or funded technology programs for youth in the area as well.

"East Palo Alto is a city reborn," says single mother Alison Henry. She and two of her children recently moved to eastern Menlo Park because she had heard the area was rich in services and programs that might benefit her family and her career.

Chance to Succeed is one program that's already benefiting her son, Cristin Wilson. "I think it's an exciting program, and I base that on his feelings about it," she said.

Ms. Henry talks about how Cristin waited on pins and needles hoping to be selected as a tutor. At first, she had some concern that if he committed too much time to tutoring, his own homework might suffer. But Cristin had another view. "He basically gave the explanation that while he's teaching others, he is learning himself," she said.

Since becoming a tutor, Cristin's grades - which were already A's and B's - have gotten even better. So far, his enthusiasm for tutoring hasn't wavered: "I like to help younger kids so they can be successful in life," he says.

Tutoring programs like Chance to Succeed are particularly valued in these neighborhoods where so many parents are working. Although gangs, drugs and violence are no longer the problems they once were, parents still worry about the influences children can encounter in the hours after school when there's less supervision.

"If kids are able to do for each other, that's a definite plus," Ms. Henry said.

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